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Mapping social work across ten countries: structure, intervention, identity and challenges

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Abstract

An emerging global consciousness and rising attention given to international social work development has seen the recognition of comparative research within the profession. Understanding the functioning and organization of social work within various country contexts is critical in order to formulate knowledge around its overall impact, successes and challenges, allowing social workers to learn from one another and build professional consolidation. The profession is mapped out in ten countries, reflecting on its structure, identity and development. Although the profession is developing globally, it is also experiencing significant challenges. Key insights, conclusions and recommendations for future research are presented.

Keywords

Social work research, international social work, social work identity, professionalism, neoliberalism, comparative research.

Introduction: A Rising Global Consciousness

Social work is an evolving and contextual profession that is deeply embedded within our global world. In recent years, as a result of an emerging “global consciousness” (Midgley, 2001: 21), and rising attention given to international social work development and collaboration, the demand for comparative research has been increasing (Meeuwisse and Sward, 2007). According to Midgley (2001: 24), “relatively few social workers are informed about professional developments in other countries... Despite the critical importance of international issues, international social work is still the purview of a small group of experts.” This need to open up comparative research to countries outside of this “small group of experts” calls for the profession to adopt a dual recognition of the need to both engage with global discourse, as well as recognise and incorporate indigenous knowledge and contributions. Understanding the structuring, functioning and organization of the profession

within various country contexts is critical in order to formulate knowledge around its overall impact, successes and challenges, allowing social workers to learn from one another and build consolidation within the profession (Midgley, 2001).

The authors of this paper form part of a EU-funded International Research Staff Exchange Scheme (FP7-PEOPLE-2011-IRSES), reflecting on Civil Engagement in Social Work: Developing Global Models (NL_CIVIL; Contract no. 318938), of which there are ten participating countries: the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Turkey, Russia, South Africa, China and India. As an objective of the project, data was gathered toward mapping the development, structure and functioning of the social work profession within each country context. Through this process, the team was able to identify key themes at play within the global profession, reflecting on the current forces and challenges influencing social work, the changing roles of the profession within society and how social work is developing across the globe within a context of increasing neoliberal and welfare reform. Despite the challenges experienced in such international collaboration, the authors believe that the mapping of the profession, albeit limited in parts, highlights key reference points, marks noteworthy areas of development and challenges, offers some consolidation, and provides direction and prompts for future international research and collaboration.

Project Methodology

The team that worked on this particular project objective was comprised of a total of 28 researchers, two to three from each represented country. The researchers were academic professionals within the fields of social work, sociology and political science, stretching across a number of universities within ten different country contexts. The team made use of secondary research, which was exploratory in its methodological approach (De Vos et al., 2005). Data was collated from a literature review of social work structuring and practice in each participating country; consultations with country team members, toward the recommendation of alternative literature and expertise; as well as the use of information gathered in a separate IRSES project, The Implications of Neoliberal Policy and Management on Social work and Vulnerable Populations (PIRSESGA-2011-295203). Country secondments by team members also allowed for exploration of broader literature bases in host countries, the consultation with regional experts, and the scoping of research methodology used in different contexts. This iterative process resulted in enhanced perspectives to ensure accurate reflection of the social work profession in each country. Data selection, simplifying,

abstraction, conclusion drawing and verification was an ongoing process requiring the expertise of the entire team.

A qualitative content analysis approach was utilised (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), facilitating cross-national comparisons and allowing for richness of data. Certain areas were benchmarked and used as focus criteria for literature and comparative study; these included:

- Roles and tasks of social workers;
- Employment opportunities;
- Key values which underlie the profession;
- Existing regulatory systems;
- Levels of accountability and professional discretion;
- Relationships, links and partnerships between the social work profession, the state, and third sector organisations in the delivery of services and the practice and civil implications of these relationships.

The final report for this project objective was then revisited and condensed by thirteen team members representing all ten countries, toward the development of this paper. Key themes were identified and country expertise from the final report has been cited. Appropriate ethical research approval was sought from all participating countries.

Project Limitations

There was recognition that the reliance on English as a medium for research was a necessary limitation due to the spread of languages and lack of funding for translation. However, this greatly reduced the richness of data available; although some non-English literature was used, when translation from the specific country team was possible. Nevertheless, in-depth information for certain benchmarked areas was still difficult to obtain, and thus was not able to be presented in enough detail. It further needs to be noted that some countries had a richer data source than others, which meant that there was a more in-depth overview of certain country contexts compared to others. However, the team attempted to meet these challenges through continued discussion and information sharing between countries and regional experts.

A further challenge was the terminology used in the report, and various understandings of singular phrases; however, this allowed for significant learning of the connotations or differences certain words hold within various cultural contexts, despite being used freely in international social work literature. In many cases, chapters in the final report

were written by authors whose first language is not English. Much of the terminology used was based largely on a UK social work model and as a result the terminology used in other contexts/countries was not always the same, or even used at all. This resulted in some compromises in the use of terminology, but although recognising this as a weakness, it was necessary in order to achieve a level of comparability for the final report.

Finally, the nature and focus of the project, the established benchmarked areas for data gathering, the scope and expertise of the teams, as well as the recognition of the context of practice all proffer certain biases and limitations.

Mapping Social Work across Ten Countries: Reflections on Social Work Structure, Intervention and Identity

The data collated in the research report was gathered under a number of benchmarked areas, as highlighted earlier in the text. The final draft of this information was large and complex and thus for the purpose of this paper, results have been compressed to present an overview; for a fuller understanding of the profession in each country context, the full report is recommended.¹ These benchmarked areas were categorised under three themes, namely *social work structure*, which reflects on the values and employment opportunities of the profession; *social work intervention*, in which roles and tasks are discussed; and finally, *social work identity*, which looks at aspects of accountability, regulation, autonomy and professional discretion, as well as the relationship of the profession with the state and civil society.

Social Work Structure

The structure of social work was determined through analysis of social work values, as well as employment opportunities within each participating country. These two areas were recognized as key to the foundational structuring of the profession.

Values. Social work values across the ten participating countries were primarily uniform, often based upon the code of ethics within each country, as well as international value frameworks established through groups such as IFSW and IASSW and laid out in the Global Definition of Social Work (latest version – IFSW, 2014). England, Spain, Italy, South Africa, Portugal, India and Russia all recognized their own specific code of professional

¹ The full report can be accessed here: <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/completed-projects/2015/civil-engagement-in-social-work-de>

ethics as the core framework for social work values; there was limited information on the Chinese code of ethics, however, and Turkey was the only country which was identified as not yet having its own established ethical code, but rather resting upon value and ethical guidelines established in bodies such as the IFSW and IASSW (Acar et al., 2015).

The social work value system of each country was also often directly linked to the established tasks and roles of the social work profession, and thus some countries emphasized certain values over others in relation to their primary roles and activities, i.e. individual versus collective orientations (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011). In Brazil, for example, the Reconceptualisation Movement of 1965 saw the social work profession reconstructing itself “based on historical and theoretical-methodological foundations from the Marxist tradition and relying on ethical and radically humanistic values and principles” (Iamamoto, 2009: 18). Thus, Brazilian social work was seen to operate upon the understanding that the profession itself is shaped by the relations and interests of social classes and should intervene at multiple dimensions, including material, spiritual and subjective (Valente Santana and Teixeira-Garcia, 2015). Another example can be found in the case of post-apartheid South Africa, where the social work profession was entirely redirected toward the principles of social development as an overarching framework (Gray and Mazibuko, 2002; Midgley, 1995).

An area of significance which was highlighted in the research report, despite differing emphasis upon values, was the fact that the international social work profession is in somewhat of a ‘value crisis’ as a result of the implementation of neoliberal and management principles, as well as the reduction of welfare and social service provision; these changes are directly impacting on the ability of the social work profession to uphold its established professional values as an international and national community. Harvey (2005:2), internationally renowned as a commentator on neoliberalism, refers to this phenomenon as a neoliberal globalisation, defining it as “...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.” Neoliberalism is having a significant global impact on social work and social service rendering (Ornellas, 2018); traces of this can be found throughout this text. The neoliberal tenet of individualism promotes a micro-centric approach to social welfare, as opposed to collective and structural address of social problems (Henderson, 2005).

In Italy for example, the principle of individualism is being increasingly valued and promoted through neoliberal influence (Martin et al., 2014). The response of Italian social workers has

been to shift the focus of intervention to that of the individual, despite arguments that a more community-orientated approach is required. Bertotti (2010) suggests that such a shift is a conscious decision by social work professionals in response to increased managerial demands and principles within practice. In Portugal, social work's ethical references remain focused on ones outlined by the IFSW. Recently, the Portuguese Association of Professional Social Work has raised concerns that social workers are increasingly being asked to implement practice and measures that are in direct contradiction to the core principles and values of the international profession (Leahy et al., 2012). This has been noted in Russia too, with the infiltration of individualism and independence 'self-help' theory (Gilbert, 1999).

In China, the growing influence of neoliberal policies is seen as threatening the post-2006 identification of the need for universal provision of community social service provisions (Law et al., 2015), although there are still some market-based principles such as 'small government, big society' which are seen as valuable (Law et al., 2015). From the limited literature available on the topic in India, it can be discerned that the individualism induced by globalisation and its concomitant social relational changes have influenced the social work profession as well. Individual identity formation has been in tension with traditional cultures in India that value cooperation, interdependence, group identity and community loyalties.

Employment Opportunities. Employment of social workers was typically divided between the state, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. Greater employment through the state is found in England, Spain, Italy, Russia and Turkey, whereas India, China and South Africa demonstrate a higher concentration of social workers in the non-governmental and private sectors (Engelbrecht and Strydom, 2013; Law et al., 2015; Rao, 2001). Portugal outlined a direct polarisation between social workers employed with the state and the third sector (Guerreiro et al., 2015), with state social workers holding better working conditions and pay than that of NGO social workers. In Brazil, Valente Santana and Teixeira-Garcia (2015) noted a trend of social work integration into state, public institutions, suggesting that almost 80% of social workers are employed within this sector. However, even in countries with higher state employment, it was noted that growing infiltration of social workers into private and nongovernmental organisations could be seen. In England for example, Hussein (2011) noted that social workers are increasingly found in non-governmental organisations and agencies, partly as a result of structural changes to the delivery of services but also due to greater flexibility, work-life balance, autonomy and support. In China, the emergence of social workers in community and civil society

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organisations is evident, but has not necessarily been welcomed or understood, particularly by the state (Law et al., 2015).

The reduction of welfare spending and state provision of social services is also having a direct impact on social work employment and service rendering. In Italy, Portugal, Spain, South Africa and Russia, it was highlighted that the financial crisis has limited job creation for social workers. Spain and Portugal, for example, two European countries who experienced significant hardship due to the economic crisis of 2008, saw a drastic reduction in social spending as a result (Abye, 2014); it was estimated in Spain that by 2012, 44.4% of registered social workers were unemployed (Gomez and Torices, 2012). In England, challenges to social work employment were resulting from recent changes to public spending, with many social work professionals experiencing or anticipating workplace restructuring, job loss, fears of service cuts and axed posts (BASW, 2012; Martin et al., 2014). Many countries also reported the impact of social services being outsourced to private organisations, or in other cases, social work professionals being called upon to take up complex work often beyond their expertise, as a result of growing need and reduced resources, such as is the case in Italy (Facchini and Lorenz, 2013).

A further challenge to social work employment, and furthermore discretion and autonomy which is discussed later in the text, is the phenomenon whereby other professionals or less skilled/qualified individuals are being employed at a lower rate for social work functions. This occurred in Russia, with organisations being under no obligation to employ fully qualified social work specialists, nor to fair pay for a qualified specialist, thereby employing less qualified or alternative professionals for similar activities (Gilbert, 1999; Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, 2002). As a result, up to 70% of social work trainees are found to have already changed their career direction before graduation (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, 2002). However, recent changes within Russian policy outline the need for social work positions to be offered to individuals with a professional education, raising the wages for specialists.

Similar challenges were noted in the English private sector (BASW, 2012) and in China, where the profession is still young and viewed as subordinate or voluntary, resulting in many graduating social workers struggling to find employment despite state-acknowledged need and demand for the profession (Law et al., 2015; Sheng, 2010). In India, the social work title is not a stand-alone identity (Ilango, 2009) and is also still viewed by many as being a voluntary activity (Ilango, 2009; Rao, 2001). This limits employment opportunities and causes disproportionately high numbers of students electing to move to human resources,

which is seen by some as “serving capitalistic forces rather than empowering the impoverished (D’Souza and Muniraju, 2011). A national consultation on National Network of Schools of Social Work for Quality Enhancement of Social Work Education in India held in 2012 identified that market interests decide preferences for specialisations such as Human Resources Management and Medical and Psychiatric Social Work; it was found that mushrooming social work institutions in India with poor quality of education and low resource support renders social workers with low employability and poor salaries.

In contrast, Turkey is filling social work posts with professionals from different disciplines as a result of a high need for social workers beyond that which is presently available (Isikhan, 2008). A similar context can be found in South Africa, with the employment of social-auxiliary workers, considered a cadre of social service professionals and a supporting professional for social workers; the use of social-auxiliary workers was particularly emphasised after social work was declared a scarce skill by the Minister of Social Development (Engelbrecht and Strydom, 2013).

Social Work Intervention

Understanding the nature of social work intervention was undertaken through the lenses and reflections on the roles and tasks of social workers.

Roles and Tasks. The roles and tasks of social work recognized in each country are predominantly uniform, much like values, in terms of the influence of national and international documents and definitions, with some variations dependent on the socioeconomic, political, cultural and contextual nature of each country. The primary roles and tasks identified in the participating countries included: change agents; problem solving; empowerment; individual, family, community and policy work; clinical work; education; administration; social protection; and advocacy. In countries such as England, Italy and Turkey, there was a stronger focus on individual/therapeutic/casework. Other country contexts demonstrated a more macro or community-orientated position. For example, in India there has been a shift from casework to a **more macro approach**, to address structural inequalities (Rao, 2001).

The participating countries varied by the needs and policies of each country. In Russia, as a result of the culture of state dependency generated by the former Soviet Union,

there is a tendency toward a greater emphasis on the social work role of resource-provider with clients/service-users acting as passive recipients (Grigoryeva, 2013); South Africa has a greater policy emphasis on developmental and community work (Ornellas, 2018), however there is still a strong tendency toward casework (Engelbrecht and Strydom, 2013); China has a greater focus on administration, over and above service-orientation. However, despite differing emphasis of certain roles over others, the social work profession in the participating countries was seen to hold multiple role ‘types’; recognising that whether these are implemented in practice is dependent on country policy variations and needs. This is observed, for example, in the context of India. Although roles and tasks identified nationally may be similar to other participating countries, the caste system in Indian society, as well as the influence and differences in how society is structured, lends itself to different social group needs, social work practice and understanding, and implemented roles and tasks (Akhup, 2013).

Portuguese social work policy, on the other hand, has become increasingly based on a holistic and universal perspective to address everyday life personal problems (Guerreiro et al., 2015). In Spain, there has been a shifted emphasis on working conditions and social change, however social work roles are also becoming increasingly administration focused (Barbero, 2002). Brazil demonstrates perhaps the most significant difference in social work roles and tasks, with a focus on overall social protection and welfare as a universal citizenship right and key role of the social worker (Yazbek, 2014). The professional social worker, therefore, centres their actions on various social situations which serve to affect the living conditions of citizens. This is based on an understanding of the profession within the context of broader modern capitalist society, its relations, functioning and inequalities (Yazbek, 2014).

A particular area of reflection within this section on the needs and policy in each country was the understanding that the roles and tasks of the social worker differed within many countries, in terms of the professional expectations and definitions of roles, as opposed to state policy or legislative expectations. For example, in China, despite strong state-based support for the profession, there are concerns that the government and local officials may not possess a full and clear understanding of what a social worker is (Sigley, 2011). Therefore, the roles and tasks expected from the state are found at times to differ from national social work definitions and society needs. Similar sentiments can be found in other countries.

In many countries the role of social work is documented as changing through the influence of neoliberal principles with a stronger emphasis on management, performance and risk-assessment. New public management methodology in England is challenging the role of

the profession, with increased management regulations and accountability expectations limiting social work functioning and effectiveness, shifting the role of social work from direct service provider to one of care manager/commissioner (Harris, 2014). This was also noted as a challenge in other participating countries, such as Italy, where the complexity of roles and tasks within the profession has increased with the impact of austerity and neoliberal reforms, leading to lessened state support, drastically increased citizen need and a shift to an individualistic focus by the profession. In South Africa, government influence on the role of social work has been most evident in the context of NGOs (the largest employer of social workers) who, owing to their dependence on government subsidies, have been found to deviate from traditional community interests in order to align themselves with government agendas and procure funding (Ornellas, 2018). Similar challenges have also been evident in Spain and Portugal (Guerreiro et al., 2015).

Social Work Identity

The identity of the profession is reflected upon through discussions around the accountability, regulation, autonomy and professional discretion of social work in various country contexts, as well as the nature of the relationship between the profession, the state and civil society.

Accountability, regulation, autonomy and professional discretion. Regulatory social work bodies were identified within England, Spain, Italy, South Africa, Portugal, China, Brazil and Turkey; a code of ethics has been formulated through such regulatory bodies, both at the national and international level, with the exception of Turkey, which does not yet have its own social work code of ethics. There is currently no regulatory body for the profession in India (Martin et al., 2014), although there are movements being made toward this (Ilango, 2009), nor in Russia, although there are four established professional organisations which hold some accountability role for the profession (Pervova and Kelasev, 2015).

Professional discretion afforded to social workers in each country varies, in terms of the levels of decision-making authority, a respect for and understanding of professional expertise, and the management of social work by other professions. In some countries such as Italy, Spain and Brazil, higher levels of autonomy and discretion are noted, with social workers still having saying power in their practice decision-making. This is seen as being less so in England, India, China (particularly in terms of non-state organisations, where the majority of social workers are employed (Law et al., 2015). In England for example, there

have been growing concerns regarding the impact of marketisation and neoliberal ideals on social work discretion (Harris, 2014), and where social work autonomy and discretion does still exist, it has been moved from the social worker to that of the manager, and/or is based upon efficiency measurements and performance-evaluation (Evans and Harris, 2004). In India, social workers are seen as having very little, if any, power and authority for independent judgements (Ilango, 2009), and in China, the profession is still viewed as somewhat subordinate, and often still involuntary, resulting in lowered authority and professional identity (Law et al., 2015). In Turkey, social workers are not considered to be autonomous as a profession and do not have the power to manage their working conditions (Acar et al., 2015).

Even in countries where discretion and autonomy within the profession is seen as being protected and encouraged, changes to this as a result of neoliberal and managerial influences are evident, such as in Italy, where performance evaluations and expectations are beginning to limit social work professional decision making and independence (Cappello, 2011); Portugal, where outsourcing from the state to private organisations has opened up space for professionals from other fields to take up social work tasks (Guerreiro et al., 2015); and in South Africa, where there are growing concerns that the political aims and agenda of the government are impacting upon the independence and discretion of social workers (Pratt and Myhrman, 2009). Within the Russian context, low professional autonomy and discretion is as a result of the young development of the profession, with social work activities initially being occupied by differential disciplines, without requiring specific qualifications. Thus, qualified social workers have struggled to develop a professional identity and expertise, which would portray the profession as being more than simply an administrative resource allocation role (Pervova and Kelasev, 2015).

Social Work, the State and Civil Society. Here, the relationship of the profession with the state and civil society were explored and reviewed in order to better understand the delivery of services and the practice and civil implications of these relationships within each participating country. Information within this particular area was complex and has been presented briefly below.

The relationship of the profession with the state, in terms of support, correspondence, employment, and roles and tasks is changing through neoliberal influence, managerialism principles, performance evaluation expectations, financial challenges and welfare reform (Lorenz, 2005). This has been most evident in England (Pollack, 2010), Spain (Martinez-Roman et al., 2015), India (Ilango 2009), Italy (Martin et al., 2014), South Africa (Ornellas, 2018), and Portugal (Guerreiro et al., 2015). In austerity-affected countries such as Spain and

Portugal, for example, welfare reforms and drastic austerity measures caused strain between the profession and the state, and generating a growing social outrage and social work resistance (Ioakimidis et al., 2014). In South Africa, social work was perceived as part of the structural system during apartheid, assisting government in maintaining racial divisions; post-apartheid years, therefore, it was questioned whether social work even had a role in the future of South Africa at all (Gray, 2006). This was later to be secured only through its redefinition to developmental social work, as discussed earlier in the text (Engelbrecht and Strydom, 2013). However, in recent years, the turn toward neoliberal ideals, reduced resources and government support, has partly caused South African social workers to move across to the third sector or private organisations.

In Turkey, social workers have highlighted challenges regarding the transformation of the administrative structure of social work, in terms of marketization and familialization, a lack of prospective agenda concerning demographic transitions, legislative changes altering the professional role of social workers and a lack of clarity regarding the implementation of legislative frameworks, particularly for child protection interventions (Acar et al., 2015). In India traditionally social workers are identified more with the non-governmental sector which are also known as civil society organisations. Conversely, in China, the relationship of the profession with the state is considered to be almost unprecedented in its support and investment (Law et al., 2015), although there are some concerns within this area. A primary concern is the belief that the state does not adequately understand what the role of a social worker is (Sigley, 2011), with the profession being seen as an adjunct to government and not necessarily as an advocate for the downtrodden (Sigley, 2011). That being said, the demand for social workers in China is growing due to the enthusiastic promotion of the profession by local government, establishing specific projects or offices to incubate new social work organisations (Law et al., 2015), although this is still being met with some scepticism (Law et al., 2015). Turkey also demonstrates more state involvement and control over social service provision than that of non-public organisations (Acar et al., 2015). Russian social workers also have a somewhat strong relationship with the state, with its operation in the NGO field underdeveloped (Gilbert, 1999; Pervova and Kelasev, 2015).

The relationship between social work and civil society is found to be growing in many country contexts, predominantly as a result of the tensions between the state and the profession and the movement of the state away from social service provision. In Spain and Portugal, for example, a strengthening of the relationship between the profession and civil society has been developed through rising resistance movements against previous state-induced welfare reforms and austerity measures (Ioakimidis et al., 2014), with social workers

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expressing concerns regarding high unemployment, increased poverty and vulnerability, the deterioration of social cohesion and the lack of social protection. Brazil is also demonstrating an increase in non-governmental initiatives and developments. Significant focus has been given to changing the intention and direction of social assistance in Brazil, toward a universal right for all citizens; this has allowed citizens to engage in the share of political power and demands, supported by social work efforts against state-induced privatisation and economization of social needs (Lyons et al., 2012). In Turkey, there are growing concerns regarding an orientation toward the privatisation of services, although the state is still considered to be a central authority within social work service rendering (Acar et al., 2015).

For some countries such as Russia and China, social work relationships with civil society and the third sector are relatively new and still underdeveloped. Despite a growing number of organisations within the Chinese third sector, research indicates that there are few engaged in social work-related activities (Sheng, 2010). Regardless of the unprecedented support and investment of the state in the social work profession, the movement of social workers into civil society and community-based organisations has not necessarily been well-received or understood (Law et al., 2015). Furthermore, NGOs in China remain in a subordinate and less autonomous status in their relationship with government (Law et al., 2015).

Key Reflections

Reflecting on the current status of the social work profession, in terms of its structure, intervention and identity, one is faced with two seemingly contradicting ideas: the first is outlined by Lorenz (2005: 97), when he reflected, “Social work is very much in demand, enjoys a boom, represents a growth industry even in countries that would ideologically do without it”. This is supported by Yip (2007), for example, who highlights the fact that social work schools sprang up rapidly in the newly marketised societies of Eastern Europe, and China, thereby suggesting that the governments of these countries see a use for professional social work in situations of growing social and economic inequality and dislocation. However, at the same time it is evident that the growing global neoliberal agenda is having an impact on the identity and role of social work within society, as well as the welfare systems in which it is often embedded (Dominelli, 2007). The implementation of neoliberal-related managerialism and performance-measurement requirements is often in direct contradiction to either welfare policy originally established by the state, and/or the values, principles and ideals of the profession itself, leaving many social workers feeling ineffective and powerless

to implement intervention that works. This raises concerns that although the profession may, and is, surviving, “the fact that it will often do so in a truncated and sometimes punitive form means that in itself, this is hardly a cause for celebration” (Ferguson, 2008: 10). However, such challenges to the profession has also resulted in the re-emergence of a resistant and radical social work profession.

Beyond the neoliberal rhetoric, there were a number of other existing challenges within the international social work community that were highlighted within this research, and need to be further discussed, debated and addressed within the profession. Here, the authors wish to note once again that the information provided in this paper is condensed; each country had specific successes and challenges that could not be discussed in such detail. However, these are some key areas/challenges noted for further research and critical reflection:

1. The poor and/or limited inter-professional networking and engagement of social workers at both the national and international level - this was raised by many country team members in the research, including specifically India and Russia, where the profession was viewed as being isolated within both national and international contexts;
2. The employment challenges faced by social workers in terms of: welfare and service provision reduction, privatization, the use of alternative/poorly qualified professionals/volunteers, and financial strains from the economic crisis and resultant austerity programmes;
3. The need to adequately understand the theoretical underpinning of the identity and structure of the social work profession within different countries (ie. strong theoretical variations in the role of social work in Brazil versus the United Kingdom). International collaboration and the development of indigenous knowledge in this regard, will remain biased toward a Western agenda without sufficient understanding of the differing theory and ontology of the profession in various contexts;
4. The drastic effects of austerity on civil society in much of Europe and the immense challenges this sets for social work;
5. The challenges linked to increased migration and refugee movements, with poor legislative or policy-based developments for social workers to effectively meet growing demands;
6. The lack or limitation of identity, autonomy and professional discretion of the profession in many country contexts, particularly in China and India where social work is still being undermined in its professional standing, as well as in countries

more ardently affected by neoliberal and managerial ideals.

Again, it must be noted that the above key reflections are explored in more detail in the full report.²

Concluding Remarks

It is evident that the social work profession is undergoing challenges worldwide, with its values and ideals being infiltrated by neoliberal reform, and its continued struggle to establish itself as a recognised and influential profession in many parts of the world, despite its noted survival, and even boom in some contexts. However, it is also evident that there is a growing resistance to such challenges and changes within the profession, suggesting that the changing socioeconomic, political and global context is “forc[ing] us, as social work and social development professionals and educators to be more aware of global realities and act differently” (Jones and Truett, 2012: 455). What is most evident is that “there is a project called social work that is worth defending, not because it keeps us in a job but because at its best it can improve people’s lives; can help them make sense of and deal with their pain, distress and problems; can challenge stigma and discrimination; and can be a part of the struggle for social justice” (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006: 316). The differential nature of the profession reflects not only the unique socio-economic, political, cultural and historic contexts but also recognition of professional debates at national levels and the need for greater international professional dialogue of challenges and efforts to resolve these. Thus highlighting the need to continue to broaden and deepen international research, and comparative collaboration within the profession is evident and must be taken up by social workers from a range of contexts, in order to better learn from one another, combat professional isolation and better meet growing global challenges to the international social work community and the citizens it serves.

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² The full report can be accessed here: <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/completed-projects/2015/civil-engagement-in-social-work-de>

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